

# MYSTERY OF SCOTLAND YARD

BY  
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## The Mystery of the Ladder of Light

(Copyright, 1914.)

UPON what trivial circumstances do great events sometimes hinge! Take the present affair as an instance. Here was a case presenting many perplexing and quite unique features—a mysterious and even desperate business which threatened the life of one good man, the honor of two others and involved the reputation of many people of high standing in both the commercial and the social world—yet had it not been Cleek's whim that he and Mr. Narkom should make Hampstead the field of their investigations that morning (in pursuit of the investigations which had for several days occupied their attention) the affair might never have found a place in these chronicles at all.

Primarily, the antecedents of the case were of the most commonplace character—resolving themselves into nothing more "mysterious" than a cipher cablegram which, on being decoded, read simply: "Just traced 25. Sailed last week on Tunisian-Allan Line from Canada, under name Hampstead. Woman with him. Handsome blonde. Passing as sister. Believed to be 74."

Mr. Narkom nearly had a "stroke" when he compared those calligraphic numbers with their counterparts in a code book and saw that their definition was registered thus:

"No. 25—Nicholas Hemmingway, popularly known as 'Diamond Nick,' American. Expert on the subject of diamonds and jewel thief. Ex-actor and very skillful at impersonation. See Rogers' Gallery for portrait."

"No. 74—Ella Plawson, variously known to members of the light fingered fraternity as 'Dutch Ella' and 'Lady Nell,' German-American. Probably the most adroit female jewel thief in existence. Highly educated, exceedingly handsome and amazingly plausible and quick-witted. Usually does the 'society dodge.' No photograph obtainable. A natural blonde and about twenty-five years old."

Within forty-five minutes after these facts were made known to him Supt. Narkom was with Cleek, laying the seriousness of the situation before his famous ally. And that it was serious was not to be understood from the fact that the whereabouts of this precious pair had not been successfully established by the American police until four hours after the Tunisian had docked and discharged her passengers, the fact that the "wanted" pair by personally investigating those districts in which they would be most likely to locate.

Thus matters stood when on the morning of the fifth day Cleek elected to make Hampstead Heath and its environs the scene of their operations, and at 8 o'clock set forth in company with the superintendent to put them in force in that particular district, with the result that by noon they found themselves in the thick of as pretty a riddle as they had fallen foul of in many a day.

It was in the neighborhood of 11:30 that what might be called "the nuttiness of a storm" introduced themselves to Cleek's notice. Thus: Turning into a quiet, shady road in that particular quarter which is known as The Vale of Health—and is, as no doubt you know, on the borders of the historic Heath—he looked up to discover that there was but one building in the entire length of the thoroughfare—a large, imposing residence set back from the road proper and encircled by a high stone wall with heavy, curiously wrought iron gates leading into the inclosure, and that before that building two copper skinned, turbaned, fantastically clad Hindoos were doing sentry duty in a manner peculiar unto themselves—the one standing as motionless as a bronze image and the other pacing up and down like a clockwork toy that had just been wound up.

"The funeral for a ducat!" exclaimed Cleek, as he caught sight of them. "And the insignia of the Rance of Jhang, at that. I knew the old girl was over for the coronation, but what on earth are her attendants doing out in this quarter of the town? She's not putting out here of late, is she?"

"No. She's still at Kensington. But what the dickens those Johnnies are doing guard duty at that place for beats me," replied Mr. Narkom. "It's the residence of Sir Mawson Leake. You know—Leake & Leake, jewelers, Bond street. Fine old place isn't it? Inherited it—did he do the business from his father? What's that? No, not a young man—not a young man by any means. Grown children—two sons. One of his first wife and one by his second who's an American, believe it or not. And—Hullo! That's a rum trick, by James! See that, did you, Cleek?"

"See what? The manner in which that clockwork chap stands in his tracks and eyes us as we passed?"

"No. The woman. All muffled up to the eyes, by Jove, and in weather like this, she stepped out of the house door, saw those two niggers, and then bolted back indoors like the Old Boy was after her."

"Saw us, more than likely—you know what high-class Hindoo women are when they are on guard duty at the place of their own. I dare say, paying a morning visit to the jeweler in reference to some of her amazing gems. That would explain the presence of the sentries, of course."

"To be sure," admitted the superintendent, and walked on, dropping the matter from his mind entirely.

Ten minutes later, however, it was brought back to him in a rather startling manner, for upon rounding the end of the thoroughfare along which they had been walking and coming abreast of an isolated building which was clearly the stable of the house they had recently passed they were surprised to hear the sound of a muffled cry within, to catch a whiff of charcoal smoke as the door was flung widely open by the same muffled female Mr. Narkom had observed previously, and something more than merely startled to have her rush at them the instant she caught sight of them, crying out distractedly:

"I feared it—I knew it—I read it in his very eyes! Oh, help me, gentlemen—help me for the love of God! I can't lift him. I can't drag him out—he's too heavy for me! My husband! In there! In there! He'll die if you don't get him out!"

They understood then, and for the first time, what she was driving at and rushed past her into the stable into which had once been designed for a coachman's bedroom—to find an apartment literally reeking with the fumes that poured out from a charcoal furnace on the floor and beside that the body of a man— inert, crumpled up, fast sinking into the helpless state of unconsciousness which precedes asphyxiation by charcoal. In the twinkling of an eye Cleek had caught up the deadly little fire-brick furnace and sent it crashing through the plugged-up window into the grounds behind and let-

ting a current of pure air rush through the place; then gathered up the semi-conscious man, carried him out into the roadway and propped him up against the side of the stable while he checked his hands and fanned his cheeks and between times snatched him with his hatbrim and swore at him for a "weak-backed, marvellous thing to call it a man and a Briton and yet go in for the poltroon's trick of suicide!"

The woman was still there, squeezing her hands and sobbing hysterically, but although she had not as yet uncovered her face it did not need that to attest the fact that she was no Hindoo, but white—like the man she had spoken of as her husband—and at the very first words she uttered she saw that he was beyond danger both as Mr. Narkom knew them for what they were—Sir Mawson and Lady Leake!

"Mawson, how could you?" she said reproachfully, going to him the very instant he was able to get on his feet and folding him to her in an agonized embrace.

"I don't know," he made answer, some-what shamefacedly, with a note of agony in his voice that made one pity him in spite of all. "But it seemed too horrible a disgrace to be lived through. I could have stood the loss of fortune, even though all I have in the world would not be sufficient to pay back half the value of the accursed thing—I could have faced that, Ada, but not the other—your many, many thimble-rigs! And now I shall have to face it! Have to admit that he—my son—mine."

"Oh, my God, Ada, it is too much to ask a man to bear. There are those on guard, those Hindoos, protecting me and mine until the Rance's steward comes to receive the Ladder of Light as promised at—"

"Sh—!" she struck him warningly, remembering the presence of the others and clapping her hand over her mouth to stay any further admission; for she had heard Cleek repeat after her husband that with "Well, I'm dashed!" and turned around on him instantly with a forced smile upon her lips, but the look of terror still lingering in her fast-winking eyes.

"It is rude of me, gentlemen, to forget to thank you for your kind assistance, and I ask your forgiveness," she said, "I owe you many, many thanks. But as this is merely a little family affair I am sure you will understand."

It was a polite dismissal. Narkom pivoted on his little, fat body on his heel and prepared to take it. Cleek didn't.

"Your pardon, but the Ladder of Light can never be regarded as a family affair in any English household whatsoever," he said bluntly. "To locate a girl in the act history if you wish it. It is a necklace—said to have once been the property of the Queen of Sheba and worn by her at the court of King Solomon. It is made up of twelve magnificent steel white diamonds, cut semicircular and each weighing thirty-eight and one-half carats. They are joined together by slender gold links fitting into minute holes pierced through the edge of each stone. It is valued at one million pounds sterling and is the property of the Rance of Jhang, who prizes it above all other of her marvellous and priceless jewels. She is a pleasant old lady to cross, the Rance. She would be a shrieking devil if anything were to happen to that necklace, your ladyship."

She had been slowly shrinking from him as the history of the Ladder of Light proceeded; but she teared back against her husband, full of surprise and alarm, and stared at the other and stared in a silence that was only broken by little fluttering breaths of alarm. "It is uncanny!" she managed to say at last. "You know of the—the necklace? You know even more?"

"And yet I have not uncovered my face nor given my name. Are you, then, gifted with clairvoyance, Mr.—Mr.—"

"Cleek," he gave back, making her a polite bow. "Cleek is the name. Lady Leake. Cleek of Scotland Yard."

"That man? Dear God, that amazing man?" she cried out, her whole face lighting up as her drooping figure sprang erect, revitalized.

"At your ladyship's service," he replied. "We are out this morning—Supt. Narkom and I—in quest of what is probably just the one particular pair in all the universe to whom a lost so valuable as the Ladder of Light would offer the strongest kind of an appeal. So if, by any chance, something has occurred which threatens the safety of that amazing necklace—"

"Come! Take me into your confidence, if it is possible. I am sure Sir Mawson acted upon the suggestion instantly."

"Mr. Cleek, I beg. I implore you to come to our assistance!" he exclaimed in a low voice, his eyes fixed on Cleek's face as if anything had happened with regard to that accursed necklace and if I can give you any information on the subject. To both questions, yes—unhappily—yes, it is as I told you. It is stolen!"

"Yesterday—from my keeping—from my house! And, God have mercy on me, I have just reason to believe that the thief is my eldest son!"

"It was brought to me yesterday—by repairing—by the Rance's own major-domo. Not a man's eyes, Mr. Cleek, but the most trusted of all her household. Three of the narrow gold links which hold the stones together had worn thin and needed strengthening. It was a good thing that I noticed it, for the Rance and the Rance, he said, had selected our house for the work on the recommendation of royalty. There were several hours' work on the thing—saw that as soon as I examined it. But I was appalled by the fearful responsibility of having a jewel of such fabulous value on the premises—with people constantly coming and going—and determined, therefore, to take the necklace home and do the work myself. I demanded that the Rance's own attendants accompany me on the journey and keep watch over my house until he should come in person to receive the necklace today."

"He acceded to this willingly; departed—still retaining possession of the jewel—returned with the guard an hour later, handed me the case containing the necklace, and I left for home a few minutes after 5 o'clock, the Hindoo guard with me. On arriving—"

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subject of our unpleasant interview of the day before."

Here Sir Mawson's voice grew curious—thick and unsteady.

"Mr. Cleek," he said, agitatedly, "it is necessary that I should tell you, at this point, something with regard to those who make up the members of my household."

"You needn't," interposed Cleek. "I have already heard. Lady Leake is, I believe, your second wife, and you have two sons."

"No—three," he corrected. "Henry, my eldest, who is twenty-four, and is the only survivor of the children of my first and most unhappy marriage; Curzon, who is just entering his twenty-first year, and Bevis, who has not yet turned seven and is, of course, still in the nursery. I may as well admit to you, Mr. Cleek, that my first marriage was a failure. We were utterly unsuited to each other, my first wife and I, and it is no doubt, only natural that the son she left me should reflect in himself some of those points of difference which made our union a mistake."

"Don't mistake me, however. He is very dear to me—dear, too, to his step-

mother, who loves him as her own, and the one strong feature in his character is the love he bears his mother. He is, too, he is my first born, my heir—and no man fails to love that first child that ever called him father."

"A man could fail to love this particular one at all events, Mr. Cleek, but in his ladyship. 'Wild, reckless, extravagant—yes! But at heart the dearest boy!'"

"Just so," interposed Cleek. "But let us get on. So this 'dearest boy' had an unpleasant interview with me the day before yesterday did he, Sir Mawson? What was it about?"

"The usual thing—money. I've paid his debts until my patience is quite worn out. At that interview, however, he asked for a thing I would not listen to, 200 pounds to settle a gambling debt at his club; to take up an I. O. U. that would get him blacklisted as a defaulter, if it were not met. Then get blacklisted, I said to him, 'if there's no other way to cut you off from the worthless set you associate with.' Then he walked out of the room and that was the last I saw of him until he pounced upon me in the hall yesterday. He'd been to town, he said, and had had a talk with the man to whom he had given the I. O. U., and, said, 'I'll pay it, but I'll have to have the money in hand—'

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"Steady, steady, Sir Mawson!" sounded Cleek's soothing voice. "Breathe on! What follows?"

"I have no very clear recollection, Mr. Cleek, for just then Lady Leake chose to add her entreaties to his, and to ask me if I would permit her to draw her next quarter's pin money in advance and let her take up the I. O. U. for him, and I was so furious at the thought of his skulking in like a beggar and a cad and trying to 'bleed' her that I flew into a violent rage, ordering him out of the house instantly. I think that even then I was conscious of a sense of gratification at the way he took that ultimatum; for, instead of whining like a whipped cur, he pulled himself up and said very quietly: 'All right, sir—I'll take you at your word. Thank you for past favors. Good-bye!' And then, walked out of the room and was gone."

"H! Leave the house, did he?"

"Yes—but not then. A servant saw him on the top landing, coming out of his own room with something wrapped up in a parcel, after that. And another—who was busy cleaning up in the lower hall—saw him come down, and go out a ten minutes past."

"And here—just here!—a strange and even startling thing occurred. With one bound, 'took-toot!' a public taxi swung round the curve of the road, jerked itself up to a sudden standstill within a rope's cast of the spot where the four were standing, and immediately there, forth a rollicking, happy, youthful voice crying out, 'Keb, ser? Keb, mum? Keb! Keb!' and hard on the heels of that flung out a laughing 'Hullo, materal!

over less than a week ago. Pardon? No, I do not recall the name of the vessel, Mr. Cleek; but whichever one it was, I gave them a very bad crossing indeed. That is why I had to render Miss Eastman the service of which I spoke."

"I should like to have a look indoors when I was in town this morning. She had a very bad fall on shipboard, Mr. Cleek, and injured her left hand."

"Mr. Narkom made a curious sort of gulping sound, and looked round at Cleek out of the tail of his eye; but Cleek did not move."

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youth with a budding mustache and a bright-faced, fair-haired little lady of about eighteen, all three staring after the taxi in blank amazement.

"My goodness, I guess Curzon and I have sort of muffed it somehow!" the little lady said.

"I guess you have, honey—I guess you have. Anyhow, let's all go and ask Sir Mawson what it's all about."

"Yes—let us by all means," put in the younger man. "Come on."

"Mr. Narkom, who heard these things, drew closer to Cleek, and contrived to whisper an inquiry to him.

"Found out anything, old chap?"

"Yes—and a very important thing, too. They are not Diamond Nick and Dutch Ella. I'm afraid, Mr. Narkom, you've been barking up the wrong tree."

By this time, the Major, his daughter and young Curzon Leake had crossed the intervening space and were at Sir Mawson's side; but on the plea of "having some very important business with these gentlemen, which would not permit of another moment's delay," Sir Mawson managed to get rid of them.

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From this hall they discovered a minute later, a broad, short flight of richly carpeted stairs which led to a square landing, and thence, through a long, long flight, striking off at right angles, communicated with the passage upon which her ladyship's boudoir opened.

"It was here that I stood, Mr. Cleek, when I caught sight of the necklace and called Jennifer to me," she said, pausing on the landing. "Now, come this way, please, and you will see how impossible it is for any one to be entered and left the boudoir during my brief absence without my seeing."

It was for the door of the boudoir—which was entirely detached from the rest of the suite occupied by herself and her husband—was immediately opposite the head of the staircase and clearly visible from the landing.

She unlocked this—the only one the room possessed—and let them see that the only other means of possibly entering was by way of a large bay window, but that was a good twenty feet from the ground and there was neither a tree nor a vine, then, and yard and garden. On her dressing table lay the open case which had contained the necklace, with a little of silver toilet articles about it; over the back of the chair hung a negligee of white silk with cascades of white lace.

"Everything is exactly as it was, Mr. Cleek, at the moment the necklace disappeared," she explained as they stepped in and looked about them. "Everything except that negligee, that is. That, of course, was not on the chair then; it was on Mr. Cleek. Mr. Cleek! Good heavens, Mawson, has the man gone mad?"

For, of a sudden, Cleek, who while she was speaking had lifted the negligee to see if there was anything on the chair—saw that it was not there. Of all the blind, mutton-headed idiots! Then laughed that curious, uncanny laugh again and made a headlong bolt for the door. "Wait for me—all of you!" In the instant he was out, she saw that until I come, I want that man Jennifer! And here, jerking the door wide open, he bolted downstairs.

It was full twenty minutes later and Sir Mawson and his daughter and Mr. Mawson were racing up and down the floor and enduring positive agonies of suspense, when the door of the music room flashed open and a dashed shut again, and before they were more—quite alone but with that curious, crooked smile looping one corner of his mouth.

"Cleek, dear old chap! The superintendent's voice was sharp and thin with excitement—"You have found out something, then?"

"I hope, Mr. Narkom, I have found out everything," he answered, "and I'm stepping to the center of the room, three back his head and moved slowly round with his eyes turned up toward the ceiling. But of a sudden he gave a little laugh, and a look of do-do."

"I have had," he said, "a nice little talk with Jennifer and a very satisfactory visit to the pirate's cave. No, your ladyship, I didn't find it in the cave, for the simple reason that it never was there; and that neither Jennifer nor Jennifer has the least idea where it is. Happily I do, however; and if, in return for it, Sir Mawson will permit me to go back that boy Henry and give him and his chance he shall have it in his hands ten seconds after this."

"I promise. With all my heart, I do!" almost choked Sir Mawson, "and I do!" "Right you are," said Cleek, in reply, then twitched forward a chair, stepped on the seat of it, reached upward into the midst of the chandelier's glittering cutglass, and twisted out something from their midst and added, "There you are, then," as he dropped the Ladder of Light into Sir Mawson's hands.

"Up in the chandelier!" exclaimed Lady Leake. "Oh, Mr. Cleek, who put it there, and why?"

"Jennifer," he made answer. "No, not for any evil purpose, your ladyship. While she was hanging the lusters in the hallway yesterday afternoon, at 1 o'clock your son Bevis paid him a visit, and when he came to replace the lusters on the chandelier one string was missing. I caught him, and he said he had taken it," was a way, he spoke of the matter, "and that I'd be sure to find it in his pirate's cave. But he hadn't, as it proved, for when her ladyship called me up to the landing and said the lint and then ran back upstairs I lay down, and there was the luster—'a-lay-in' on the landing' just where she had stowed it."

"On the landing? Lying on the landing, you say, Mr. Cleek? But heavens above, how in the world could the necklace have got there? Nobody could possibly have entered the boudoir after I left it—and in that brief space of time?"

"To be sure," he made reply, "and it was the absolute certainty of that fact which forced the key to the riddle upon me. Since it was only possible for one person to have entered the room, then, beyond all question that person must be the one who carried the necklace out. Therefore, there was but one conclusion—that when you left the room the Ladder of Light left it with you, and so—Gently, gently, your ladyship. If you will examine the necklace closely, Sir Mawson, you will see that it has not come through any adventure unscathed. One of the two sections of its clasp is missing and the wire link which once secured the diamonds to that section of the clasp has parted in the middle. You might know that when I lifted Lady Leake's negligee from that chair a while ago I found this clinging to the lace of the right sleeve. Pardon me. Yes, the missing part of the clasp, your ladyship. I think there can hardly be a doubt that when you reached over, your sleeve caught on the clasp of the necklace, became entangled, and when you hurried to the door, you carried the Ladder of Light with you. Then without doubt when you leaned over the banister to call down to Jennifer, the weak link snapped and the necklace dropped after the which the clasp was broken. A sovereign to a rent it will be the Rance's major-domo. So come, alone, Mr. Narkom, we will have to look farther for Dutch Ella and her pal."

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